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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000924

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: POLLS PUT RESPONSIBILITY FOR TENSIONS AT
AKP'S DOOR

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner, for Reasons 1.4 (b
,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT. Turks hold the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) responsible for current political tensions, with mixed consequences for party support, according to recent surveys by rival polling companies A&G and Metropoll. A&G's April poll showed voter support for AKP slipped to 42% from 54% in January, while Metropoll's survey showed an increase to 50% from January's 44%. Both polls show a rise in concern about secularism, although significant numbers remain unconcerned. In a WorldPublicOpinion.org poll, 83% of Turks said government leaders should consider opinion polls when making important policy decisions but 53% said the people's views should only have influence during elections, not between elections. AKP leaders are avid poll watchers, though they mainly rely on AKP-solicited surveys. The mixed findings in these independent polls may make it more difficult for Erdogan to hear the public's "told you so" message on AKP's predicament. Just as important, the ambivalence in the poll results reflects the continued need for a viable alternative to AKP. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

POLLS FIND PUBLIC LINKS AKP TO TENSIONS

12. (SBU) Istanbul-based A&G's late April poll of 2,402 people in 33 provinces found 42.6% of respondents blamed AKP for Turkey's current tensions, while 34.7% named opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and 23.6% said liberalizing use of the Islamic headscarf; 7.6% blamed far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP), 5.7% cited Abdullah Gul's election as president and 10.9% said "other". A&G's poll showed support for AKP slid to 41.7% in late April (figure includes distributed votes of the one-quarter undecideds), down from 54% in January and 57% in September 2007. A&G attributed the decline to the effect of external markets, Turkey's political tension and economic stagnation. Support for CHP increased to 22.7% from 18.7% in January, and MHP's support climbed to 17.9% from January's 15.2%.

13. (SBU) In contrast, Ankara-based Metropoll's April 5-6 telephone survey of 1,204 people in 26 provinces showed 50% would vote for AKP, up from 44% in January but down from December's 52% figure. CHP's support increased to 12% from 10% in January, noticeably down from its 21% share in the July 2007 election. MHP's support increased to 7% from 6% in January, down from December's 11% showing and the party's 14%

share in July 2007. A hefty 10% remained undecided. While half of those polled reported they are happy with their lives, 37% were not; 57% believed Turkey's situation will get worse and 39% believed things will improve.

14. (C) Despite AKP's increased support, 48% of Metropoll respondents believed AKP leaders' actions led to a closure case against the party that has further polarized the country, although 72% opposed AKP's closure. "Half of the people blame Erdogan for causing the closure case and for political tensions, even though they oppose closure," Metropoll director Ozer Sencar told us. Erdogan thought AKP's 47% victory in July 2007 elections would protect the party, he added. "Erdogan tried a big bluff without having the cards to play. He didn't understand the depth of the bureaucratic, media, judicial and academic opposition, but the people knew there would be a reaction." AKP missed an important opportunity by not proceeding more carefully with its agenda. Sencar noted 48% of respondents in an earlier survey had predicted lifting Turkey's headscarf ban at universities would cause tension -- and they were right. "The people are trying to tell the Prime Minister not to bring these sensitive issues up because it only creates tension. But he doesn't listen." Even so, 37% of participants gave Erdogan top billing as Turkey's most admired living politician, followed by President Gul with 12%. The poll claims a confidence level of 0.95 and a margin of error of +/-2.8.

15. (SBU) In a WorldPublicOpinion.org poll of 17,525 respondents in 19 countries between January and March, 83% of Turks said government leaders should consider public opinion

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polls when making important policy decisions. Turkey was the only country among the 19 surveyed, however, where a majority (53%) responded that elections are the only time leaders should heed the public's views; 43% said public views should influence leaders between elections as well. A strong majority of Turks (83%) agreed the people's will should be the basis of the government's authority, and 64% said this principle should have more influence over the way Turkey is governed, according to the poll.

16. (C) Metropoll respondents split 40-40 over whether AKP would be closed, with almost 20% undecided. Thirty-eight percent did not support party closures by judicial decision and 35% said only parties promoting or using violence should be closed; 23% maintained parties operating contrary to the constitution or laws should be closed. A&G found that 52% of its poll participants believe AKP should not amend the constitution to make party closure more difficult while the case against it is pending; 41% of respondents felt such action would be acceptable. Half of Metropoll respondents would support an AKP-sponsored constitutional amendment and referendum to make party closures more difficult, while 41% would vote against such a measure.

"CLOSURE CASE RESCUED AKP"

17. (C) Sencar, who pegs AKP's core of loyal voters at 30%, noted AKP's support will remain high until a credible opposition develops. Sencar said AKP's support was on the decline until the Chief Prosecutor filed the closure case in March. "The case rescued AKP," Sencar commented. AKP would have been in a difficult situation by the end of 2008, Sencar predicted. "Now Erdogan can blame the economic crisis on the closure case." Erdogan will have a harder time persuading Turks recently revitalized reform efforts are sincere and not self-interested, Sencar added. "He slowed democratization and EU efforts for over two years but now that the party is faced with a crisis, he is saying everything must change." If AKP had emphasized democratization and broad constitutional reform after the July elections instead of pushing controversial measures, party opponents would not have dared to close the party, according to Sencar.

SECULARISM AT RISK?

18. (C) Both polls queried participants about threats to secularism: 55% of Metropoll participants said secularism is not under threat and 39% believed it is, up from 30% in March; 41% of A&G respondents were not concerned about secularism, 38% expressed concerns and 11% reported partial concerns. More specifically, 65% of Metropoll respondents do not see AKP as a threat to secularism, while 28% do.

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